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ABSTRACT

This publication examines some of the skills that informed observers see as most critical for principals who seek to be effective leaders in restructuring schools. It also highlights some principal-preparation programs, both preservice programs at colleges and universities and inservice programs for practicing principals. The document examines some of the ways those programs try to teach those critical skills and considers whether the newer methods of administrator education have any real impact on schools. A paradox for today's school leaders is that they must be clearly in charge of developing school restructuring goals, yet also be open to staff input. Their primary administrative tasks are to focus on and maintain the school vision and to create a learning environment. Although administrators who participate in innovative preparation programs usually greatly expand their understanding of school administration, they are often unable to reshape their schools' organizational cultures. However, graduates of innovative programs are in high demand, and with time, they can impact the schools in which they work. (LMI)

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Brief to principals

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BRIEF NO. 10 WINTER 1994

A Leadership Paradox	2
Creating a Vision	3
Preparing Principals	3
Innovative Programs	4
Professional Development	4
Impact	5

EA 026 491

New Directions for Principals

By Leon Lynn

Paula Evans wasn't always convinced that a school's efforts to restructure depended on the school's principal.

"I used to think a critical mass of teachers could work around a principal who just let them be," said Evans, who directs the National Re:Learning Faculty, an educator training program, for the Coalition of Essential Schools.

"But I've come around to believing that the principal has a critical role to play," she said. "You can never depend on one phenomenal leader to change a whole school... but I really believe now that the leader is absolutely essential to successful school change."

Evans is not alone in rethinking the principalship. Since the 1980s, a growing number of educators, policymakers and analysts have been re-examining the roles that principals play in their schools, the skills and talents they need to do their jobs well, and how they can best acquire those skills and talents.

While some observers see formidable obstacles preventing changes in how principals are trained and how they perform their jobs, others point to signs that a new philosophy of school management is taking root in at least some schools.

This brief examines some of the skills that informed observers see as most critical for principals who seek to be effective leaders in restructuring schools. It also spotlights some principal preparation programs–both "pre-service" programs at colleges and universities and "in-service" programs aimed at principals already on the job. We examine some of the ways those programs try to teach those critical skills, and consider how well the programs meet the challenge of equipping principals to be effective leaders.

Finally, this brief considers whether newer methods of preparing school leaders have had any real impact on schools.

General Skills

A good principal must first possess the basic skills necessary to keep a school running, said Kent Peterson, a professor of educational administration at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who also conducts research on school principals and shared leadership for the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools. That is, a principal must be well-grounded in budgeting, scheduling and the other

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nuts-and-bolts processes at the heart of a functioning school, he said.

This has long been seen as a principal's primary role in a school. But today, especially in restructuring schools, principals are also expected to be much more.

The principal must also be a "collaborative leader," Peterson said. This means guiding teachers and other staff members in an ongoing process to define the school's goals for restructuring, to develop realistic plans for achieving those goals, and to continually assess the progress the school has made.

This process relies on a "sustained mode of inquiry" created by the principal, Peterson said, by which staff members constantly re-examine their work, compare their experiences with their peers and seek solid, knowledge-based insight on ways to improve. To keep this process on track, a principal needs good interpersonal skills and the ability to resolve the conflicts that inevitably arise from serious reflection, he said.

To ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills they need to accept increased decision-making responsibility, a principal must guide and stimulate their professional development.

The principal must "sustain a climate of cooperation" in the school, said Richard Wallace, who spent 12 years as superintendent of the Pittsburgh public schools before he became a co-director of the Superintendents Academy at the University of Pittsburgh. This means a principal needs "to thoroughly understand the change process," he said, and also must guide and stimulate teachers' professional development.

A Leadership Paradox

While a good principal must be the person clearly in charge of developing and transmitting a school's goals for restructuring, he or she also must be open to input from teachers and other staff members, Peterson said. Responsiveness to teachers is often needed because teachers often have more expertise on critical issues of curriculum and teaching. Also, teachers need a sense of ownership if they are to make a sustained commitment to new goals and practices. "Sometimes they (principals) need to be leaders, and sometimes they need to be followers," he said. "That may sound like a paradox, but that's what it takes."

That paradox "creates a lot of ambiguous feelings among principals," said Ken Leithwood, a professor of educational administration who heads the Center for Leadership Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. "In restructuring schools," he said, "the administrators can see power slipping away, and they're not sure what to do in its place."

The answer lies in "looking differently at power," said Paul Schwarz, a co-director of Central Park East Secondary School in New York City.

"Principals need to see themselves as having the power to get things done, not just having power over people," said Schwarz, who also serves as a mentor principal through the National Re:Learning Faculty. Through this program, principals act as mentors for other school leaders in their geographic regions.

Schwarz recalled a dilemma he faced last year at Central Park East, when budget constraints dictated that one of 12 staff members at the school would have to change job assignments. No one wanted to move, "so they came to me and asked me to do binding arbitration," he said.

Schwarz accepted the role, but in retrospect, he felt that he had made a mistake. "My agreeing to do this was, in a sense, a disempowering act for the community," he said. "By agreeing to unilaterally make the decision, even though they asked me to, I undermined our belief in a

"Principals need to see themselves as having the power to get things done, not just having power over people," said Paul Schwarz, a co-director of Central Park East Secondary School in New York City.

powerful consensual community. I shouldn't have let us off the hook."

When Schwarz announced his decision–he felt that a 12th grade teacher should move to the 8th grade–"it raised complicated new issues for everyone," he said. "Now we were really in a mess, because I had agreed to be a binding arbiter in a community that believes it has the right to question all decisions."

A new plan was proposed: A special committee of teachers and administrators was created, and met daily until it reached a decision. In this way, Schwarz played a key role in the decision process but maintained the principle that the staff (including the principal) was the highest decision making group in the school, and that all decisions are made by consensus.

In the end, the committee made the same decision Schwarz had proposed, "but if we had come up with something different, I would have supported it," he said.

Creating a Vision

A good principal needs to be willing to share leadership, but it nevertheless remains the principal's job to focus and maintain the school's vision, said Wallace of the University of Pittsburgh. This means keeping specific goals and principles in mind, he said, and leading the staff away from potential distractions.

Too many schools stray from their basic mission of "developing the rational processes of the individual," he said. Schools can get bogged down by trying to address certain "attitudinal issues" as well. A student's feelings toward particular lifestyles, for example, "should not be the province of education," he said. "Let the home take care of those issues."

This doesn't mean that principals should ignore the world beyond the school gates, Wallace said. Quite the contrary: As the nation's demographics change rapidly, principals must pay more attention than ever to cultural diversity and other social issues. Urban principals in particular need to understand issues of poverty, "and what children of poverty are likely to bring with them to school, in terms of attitudes and behavior," he said.

But the vision a principal crafts for a school must be focused on learning and how learning takes place within different modes of instruction, and must be rooted in "specific philosophical, psychological and curricular and instructional assumptions," Wallace said.

Scott Thomson, executive secretary of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, also sees the principal's primary task as "creating a learning environment," with a focus on classroom instruction as its center.

"Non-instructional" concerns, such as dropout prevention or coordinating community and social services for students, can help create a school environment where learning can take place, he said. But principals can easily get sidetracked by the demands of starting and sustaining such programs, and can thereby lose that focus on learning, classroom practice and curriculum. "Learning doesn't happen automatically just because the school has a good breakfast program," he said.

Other observers point out that each restructuring school must craft a unique vision. Certainly, some central themes should guide a principal in developing that vision, said Bernard Mecklowitz, a former chancellor of the New York City school system and director of the Principals Institute, a leadership training program conducted by the Bank Street College of Education in New York and the city's board of education.

Those underlying themes include a strong emphasis on curriculum development, a democratic process for pursuing and continually re-examining the school's goals, and opening up that process to meaningful input from parents, students and the rest of the school's community, Mecklowitz said. "That's all part of what has to happen. But how you customize that vision depends on where you are working, and the mix of people you are working with. The vision must reflect that school's particular strengths, weaknesses, community and history."

Preparing Principals

As the "job description" of a principal has grown more demanding and complex, a growing number of educators and scholars have criticized the training programs that have prepared people for the job.

Traditional preparation programs–usually pre-service programs based in colleges or universities, which award certification and advanced degrees–rarely concentrate on the challenges principals actually face in real schools, said Joseph Murphy, chairman of the department of educational leadership at Vanderbilt University. These programs typically require students to attend lectures on educational theory and write papers, he

Improving principal-education programs means adopting new methods of instruction and preparation aimed at blending the academics and practice," said Joseph Murphy, chairman of the department of educational leadership at Vanderbilt University.

said. Most require little or no field work, such as an internship, that could give students practice dealing with real school problems.

Most programs still reflect a "behavioral science approach" to school leadership developed during the late 1940s and early 1950s, Murphy said. In this approach, schools prepare principals by teaching courses in sociology, policy, economics and educational theory.

A principal certainly needs a grasp of educational theory and professional knowledge, "but knowledge by itself doesn't help," Murphy said: Students also need a real-world context into which they can plug that knowledge, or it doesn't do them any good.

Murphy also noted that since most pre-service programs are not highly selective in admissions, they end up awarding degrees and certification to some people who really aren't cut out to be dynamic school leaders.

Trying to fix this system means going a lot further than simply changing the curriculum of educational administration programs, he said. It means adopting new methods of instruction and principal preparation aimed at "blending the academics and practice."

During the past five years or so, reform has indeed begun to take hold in many pre-service programs, and "there's been a systematic rethinking of priorities," said Murphy, spurred in part by government efforts to improve schools and student achievement, particularly state-level initiatives.

Even though "the evidence is overwhelming" that most pre-service programs still rely on classroom lectures and paper-writing as their main methods of instruction, Murphy finds that more programs are now requiring students to serve internships, or mentorships that pair them with experienced, successful principals.

Innovative Programs

The St. Louis-based Danforth Foundation, for example, has provided funding and guidance to 20 universities interested in connecting their preparation programs with school districts pursuing reform, said Peter Wilson, director of the foundation's school leadership program. Each school district made a major commitment to providing internships for university students, he said, "so they could really learn the job."

Another example: At Bernard Mecklowitz's five-year-old program at the Bank Street College of Education in New York, each pre-service student serves a five-month internship under the direction of a principal/mentor. This 18-month master's degree program serves teachers and other New York school employees exclusively. Except for the months they spend as interns, students are expected to continue performing their regular jobs during the program, while taking classes at night.

The program is rigorous but rewarding, said Kathy McCullough, a graduate who is now director of the Earth School, an alternative elementary school program in New York that stresses integrated curriculum and a child-centered approach to learning.

In addition to real-world administrative experience, McCullough said the program gave her access to a rich network of faculty members–including many ex-principals–and fellow students. "I can talk to people who know how to work the system and get what you want for your school," she said. "When a situation comes up at my school, these are the people I think of calling."

Professional Development

Numerous innovative programs also offer training and guidance to principals already on the job.

The California School Leadership Academy, for example, was established by the state's education department in 1984. The program aims to strengthen the instructional leadership skills of school leaders and, hopefully, thereby improve student achievement. More than 9,000 principals and other school leaders have received training through the program since then.

During a series of multi-day trainings, usually at least 10 during a period of two or three years, principals are shown concrete ways to analyze their practice and improve it, said Laraine Roberts, the academy's director of research and development. The goal, she said, is to help school leaders bridge the gap between theory and practice, and develop "an accessible knowledge base they can use in their schools" as they pursue meaningful reform.

The Coalition of Essential Schools has tried to provide solid real-world training through such programs as the National Re:Learning Faculty, said director Paula Evans. This program takes a broader approach to developing school leadership: the 250 educators now enrolled are mostly teachers. The goal is to create a national cohort of practitioners focused on "building reform around what teachers and principals need," Evans said.

Impact

The National Re:Learning Faculty program is currently rethinking strategy and its next steps. "We don't see important ideas taking hold in schools," Evans said. People come to workshops and seminars "and have very significant professional development experiences," she said, "but find it difficult to embed radically new ideas within their schools."

As a result, Evans said, the program will probably be expanded and changed in some major ways. "What we're finding is that teaching hasn't changed in enough classrooms, leadership hasn't changed in enough buildings, to carry forward in this way." Several proposals for building the program's effectiveness–such as expanding it by involving groups of educators from each school–are currently being considered, she said.

Other programs report similar experiences: Principals and other school leaders are learning new concepts and techniques, but often have trouble bringing them home to schools that aren't willing to consider them, much less try them.

The California School Leadership Academy is contemplating big changes in its training programs, because "we haven't seen change at a deep enough level...." said Laraine Roberts. Trainees report they are getting useful, concrete ideas from the programs they attend, "but the more powerful ideas, (such as) reshaping organizational culture to move toward a vision of what's happening to students, that just isn't happening," she said. "They (trainees) see the theory of organizational culture, but they don't see a way to develop that idea into an analysis that results in data used to make decisions."

That's certainly not true in every school, Roberts said, but academy staff members haven't seen enough change "to make us feel our work was having the impact we felt it should have."

Leaders of other innovative programs remain optimistic, however, that significant change can occur. At the Principals Institute in New York, Mecklowitz acknowledges that there's no hard data to prove his program turns out principals who do things differently and better. "But superintendents want these people," he said. "And we look around us to see which schools are achieving and which aren't, and we see our graduates doing well. We see a lot of new practices in their schools."

The program sends 30 to 50 new principals into the 1,100-school New York City system every year, after arming them with "the right certification, but more so the right mind," Mecklowitz said. "In a period of 10 years, that's a way to have real impact," he said. "That's a realistic way, a real way, to change the system."

At Brigham Young University, which overhauled its educational leadership program 10 years ago in favor of a strong emphasis on internships, department chairman Ivan Muse points out his program's placement rate of roughly 90 percent. "Superintendents tell us that our graduates are two years ahead of people from other programs.... They have a much better grasp of what's happening in the school," Muse said. "They understand the change process, they know how to work with teachers and parents. They demonstrate good judgment.... I don't think we'll ever go back to the way we used to do things."

Some principals and other school leaders say they are learning new concepts and techniques, but have trouble bringing them home to schools that aren't willing to consider them, much less try them.

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